

USA

BUSES AND TRAINS AMID TOWERING CLIFFS

At more parks, visitors leave the car behind

By Todd Wilkinson

Special to The Christian Science Monitor

As millions of travelers set out for the wilds of America's national park system this summer, more urban denizens than ever will find the trappings of the morning commute awaiting them at the ranger's toll both.

Buses, shuttles, even green trains could transport them - not to steel-skyscraper canyons, but to stops at Half Dome and Kolob Arch, herds of moose and storied hiking trails. From Yosemite in California's High Sierra to Acadia on Maine's rugged coast, a revolutionary shift toward mass transit is taking place at some of the most popular crown jewels in the country, as the National Park Service makes a major - and somewhat controversial - push to shoehorn visitors out of their beloved cars.

"US national parks are on the brink of perhaps a whole new era in how visitors move through parks and interact with them," says Laura Loomis, a public-transit specialist with the National Parks Conservation Association.

Indeed, if proponents of propane-fueled buses, electric trains, and futuristic trams make their case successfully in Congress this summer, the car could soon head the way of the horse-and-buggy in many parks now overwhelmed by traffic congestion, smog, and vast swaths of asphalt.



CANYONS FROM A BUS:

The photo's cutline goes here. This describes the action taking place in the photo.

DOUGLAS C. PIZAC/AP/FILE

Several ambitious mass-transit plans are already in the works:

- Yosemite (which saw 3.4 million visitors in 2000) is beginning a two-year demonstration program in which visitors have the option of leaving their vehicles outside the park and riding shuttles into the heart of Yosemite Valley. The goal is to eventually remove 1,100 parking spaces that presently cover an area the size of several football fields with asphalt.

- At Acadia on Maine's Mount Desert Island (2.4 million visitors), a fleet of 17 propane-powered buses transported nearly 200,000 passengers last year and reduced vehicle emissions by 2.7 tons of

nitrous oxide, 5.4 tons of hydrocarbons, and 709 tons of carbon dioxide.

- At Golden Gate National Recreation Area in the greater San Francisco area (14.4 million visits), an open-air electric tram formerly used at the Olympic Games in Atlanta is used for tours. Across the Bay, two trams carry visitors up the steep grade at Alcatraz Island to the prison's historic cellblock.

For the Park Service, the shift toward mass transit is full of irony. No other public-land agency in the US has done more to cement the cultural attitude that the best way to encounter the outdoors is from behind one's own windshield. But old habits aren't necessarily hard to break - particularly when the status quo is no longer an option, Ms. Loomis says.

Indeed, experts say the situation at some of the parks has gotten so dire they've been forced to consider alternatives. On the busiest days of the summer, some 6,000 cars typically jockey for 2,500 parking spaces along the Grand Canyon's South Rim. And at Acadia, the smog problem became so bad in recent years that it caused health concerns.

Forty national parks already have some kind of public transportation, typically as an adjunct to the dominant auto use. The revolution is transit plans that aim to replace cars altogether in the parks' most congested areas, where just getting to a campground can be more daunting than navigating rush hour.

That's already the case at Zion National Park in southern Utah, where the route through Zion Canyon to the historic Zion Lodge is restricted to buses, hiking, and biking. The system was imposed after years of surging visitation caused environmental damage and safety concerns. Rangers on the buses deliver natural-history talks and, proponents say, give visitors a more personal connection to the park.

Of course, in a country where the car is a national symbol of independence, not everyone is gung-ho about the trend. Some visitors are loath to leave their cars behind. And last autumn the Park Service's most ambitious transit project - light rail proposed for the South Rim of the Grand Canyon - was taken off track by Congress, who asked the agency to consider less-costly options.

US parks working to phase out cars	
Grand Canyon (Ariz.)	
Yosemite (Calif.)	
Zion (Utah)	
Golden Gate (Calif.)	
Acadia (Maine)	
Denali (Alaska)	

STAFF

Grand Canyon planning specialists will deliver a report to Congress in July comparing a range of options, including expanding the bus system now operating from the state-of-the-art Canyon View Information Plaza - intended to be a hub for rail - and a green trails network.

But everyone agrees the current park infrastructure needs attention. President Bush has already called for \$4.9 billion in added national-park spending to address the agency's growing maintenance woes. A recent assessment rated 40 percent of the 8,000 miles of roads within the park system as poor to fair.

While the budget increase is welcome, planners would like to see more funding directed toward fixing chronic congestion problems instead of

patching potholes and rebuilding highways. Just 5 percent of the additional \$167 million the agency will receive this year for infrastructure repairs is for mass transit.

In the coming weeks, federal officials plan to release findings that evaluate US park transportation needs. They will reveal that public-land agencies are ill-prepared to handle visitor volumes projected to dramatically increase in the years ahead, say those familiar with the document. The Park Service expects overall visitation to set another record in 2001, reaching almost 300 million.

Parks already experimenting with mass transportation say they've met with positive feedback so far. "Initially people [visiting Zion] were a little hesitant and didn't know if they'd like being separated from their cars, but our members have told us it works very well," says Rolayne Fairclough of the Utah office of the American Automobile Association (AAA).

For generations it would have been sacrilege to talk about phasing out cars at national parks, but today the alternative of doing nothing is unacceptable, says David Barna, chief Park Service spokesman in Washington.

The paradox of public-transportation systems, he adds, is that as auto congestion problems are alleviated, even more visitors will be able to enjoy the natural wonders and, cumulatively, have less of an impact. "We need to have a national conversation about what we want our parks to be like," Mr. Barna says. "No one has wanted to talk about gridlock, but it's a reality. I see the course we're on now being part of a necessary transition that will occur over the next 20 to 30 years."

For further information:

- [National Park Service](#)

